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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

Abstract

Educators are more than just teachers. Effective teachers are more than simply instructors, and instructional leaders are more than just administrators. Servant leadership is more than a method of managing a school or an office. It is something that encompasses the essence of a person. A servant leader is one whose foundational beliefs begin with the notion to serve first. This leadership persona is not something that one turns on while at work; it is generally part of the guiding principles a person has, and affects all aspects of a person's life.

A leader of service encompasses all facets of the leadership role of the principal, including the role of a reflective practitioner, a change agent, and a leader of learning for students as well as adults. Thankfully, it is my desire to serve others and to assist them on the road to success, be it elementary students or the teachers and support staff who influence them on a regular basis. It is my goal to foster leadership abilities in others to create a positive learning environment for the students and staff whom I will have the privilege to serve.

LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Attaining my lifelong dream of becoming a teacher in my thirties has given me a great appreciation for the profession. I feel privileged to work with students on a daily basis, despite the occasional roadblocks and exhaustive commitment required to be successful. I am proud to belong to a community of learners. The world of education is demanding and perhaps less than rewarding financially. However, it is the only career which fulfills my personal and professional goal of having the opportunity to serve others. Teaching ignited my desire to delve deeper into the field of education by pursuing my master's degree. I felt that it was time to explore my life-long learning opportunities.

Working with adults through professional development also motivated me to work towards becoming an administrator. I was not motivated to become an administrator by the prospect of making more money or even finding a secure job. In fact, according to Jeff Archer (2002, p. 2), the Educational Research Service conducted a survey revealing that many new principals actually are earning less compared to many teachers when considering the additional months that administrators must work. Fortunately, the desire to make a difference in the lives of children as well as adults is my motivation rather than the prospect of greater financial gain.

Being a teacher has allowed me to grow creatively, personally, and professionally. Many have asked why I would want to leave the classroom and enter the administrative sector of education. While teaching has been a

challenging and rewarding career, I would like to share my enthusiasm for education in another capacity. Entering the educational leadership program was another step on the path to fulfilling my personal and professional goals. With a background in business, I believe that I have the propensity for becoming an effective instructional leader. I not only see the need for quality teachers, but I see the need for quality leaders who can relate to students, teachers, and support staff in a positive way.

As part of my personal belief system, I believe in going above and beyond the written expectations for my job. I believe this quality will be a positive attribute in my career as an educational leader. The job is not limited to a timeframe on a calendar or on a clock. It is my everyday representation of life that will matter in the eyes of community members, staff, and students. My dedication to the job of educating all children will help me to create a system of support or a social network for myself and others when I am in the role of principal. Becoming a principal will allow me to share my passion for education and continue to grow personally, and professionally, while assisting others to do the same. "From the social network perspective, learning is a social and collective outcome achieved through seamless conversations, shared practices, and networks of social connections" (Brown & Duguid, 1991). In other words, my job as a principal will involve collaboration within the context of the school as well as in the greater community.

My aspiration for the future is to demonstrate the advantages of being a life-long learner to the students and the adults that I will have the privilege to encounter. Ultimately, I plan to continue making an impact on students through the social network I foster within the community of learners by becoming a reflective practitioner, an agent of change, an advocate for improved learning in adults and students, and a leader of service.

The Role of an Educational Leader

What exactly is the role of an educational leader? A principal is first and foremost an instructional leader. Finding just the right balance between being an instructional leader and a manager is critical for success. A principal must have the essential organizational management skills necessary to manage the business of a school. A principal is an advocate for all students in the learning community. I am not only part of a learning community, but part of the greater community as well. As an effective school administrator, I will collaborate with families in the community to bridge the gap between school and home. Additionally, I will be a believer in all students regardless of contextual background.

A principal has some large shoes to fill. With enthusiasm, persistence, and dedication to the profession, I am confident that I can fill those shoes. Becoming aware of the current culture and climate of a building or district is helpful in determining how to proceed with making the job my own. In fact, relating the climate and culture to an iceberg is a helpful reminder of what I will

face as a new principal. "Climate is the part of the iceberg that is visible, and culture is the part of the iceberg hidden below the water's surface." (Bulach, 2001, p. 51). Improvements and change are a part of every new position, but as a principal, I must demonstrate my appreciation for the current climate and culture of a school to avoid alienating individuals who are deeply rooted in the current conditions.

Building relationships is an important part of developing a positive climate and culture that includes collegial interactions. Collegiality includes the sharing of ideas, observing each other in action, and the spirit of "rooting for one another's success" (Barth, 2006 p. 11). While the job description of being an instructional leader, an effective manager, and a nurturer of a positive learning environment sounds a bit overwhelming at times, I look forward to facing the new challenge and affecting change in the community that I have the privilege to serve.

Reflective Practitioner

A reflective educational leader is one who is a lifelong learner and a role model for staff, students, and community members. According to Jarvis, "Reflective practice is more than just thoughtful practice; it is the process of turning thoughtful practice into a potential learning situation" (1992, ¶ 2). In other words, everyday can be a learning experience if a professional actively examines the events of the day and explores alternate options or outcomes. To

truly be a reflective administrator, there must be more than just the insightful thought process, there must be action taken as a result of the contemplation.

Often educators, including principals, are overwhelmed with the growing demands of mandates, student needs, and changing practices. Routinely we all go through the motions of the day without constructively examining the events that took place. Reflective practice involves much more than journaling or recording anecdotal notes on a calendar page. It is an active process of examining an experience. The next step is to fine tune the process or adopt a new process for the future. Kathi Wagner expands on reflective practice by suggesting that when we set personal goals, we look for innovative practices to improve our leadership. However, she goes on to recommend incorporating reflective assessments from others with self evaluation and goal setting. "A reflective assessment will help you celebrate your accomplishments, evaluate your skills, use your strengths more efficiently, and continue to set goals" (Wagner, 2006, p. 30). In other words, reflective practice is not an individual task. It requires goal setting, input from others, and personal reflection in order to make informed decisions for future practice.

On a daily basis, educational leaders deal with a wide array of issues. When teachers or administrators are not reflective, then often only the symptoms of an issue are addressed (White, 2002, p. 5). White goes on to explain that one of the major problems with ineffective reflective practice is when administrators

only look at the surface or symptom of a problem rather than looking for the root cause (2002, p. 5). Another example of this type of thinking is Aronson's pump handle theory (2002, p. 45). Aronson referred to the cholera epidemic of 1854 in London. When the source of the contamination was identified as one particular well, the handle to the pump was removed (2002, p. 46). This was a temporary solution which cured only the symptoms of a problem, but it did not cure the underlying cause of the contamination. This is exemplary of the way many educators approach the problems they face.

Being a reflective practitioner applies to all professionals, not just educators. There is an abundance of information about how to be a reflective leader in the fields of business and industry, medicine, and education. One tool for reflective practice is the five-step DECAF model illustrated by Dan White. The acronym DECAF represents D-describe, E-evaluation, C-connections, A-analyze, and F-future actions to be taken based on reflection. This DECAF model is a practical method of active reflection. When I am a principal it will be imperative to take the time to reflect on a regular basis. The starting point may be simply keeping notes or journal entries on a regular basis. However, this is only the first step. Reflection needs to go beyond keeping a journal to including an evaluation of the events that take place. The next step should include an analysis of the reasons why things happen well or not so well. This is also the time to draw on the network available to me. In a true practice of reflection, talking over

events with other administrators will be beneficial. Finally, by identifying what should be done differently, I will be more effective in future decision making.

While time constraints prevent many professionals from taking the steps to effectively reflect upon their practice, it is a key ingredient to success. There will need to be a way to record these thoughts in a time-effective manner. Perhaps a simple form on the computer will meet this need. Personally, I use Microsoft Excel so that I have sorting options. A small voice recorder to keep track of notes and ideas is beneficial as well. This method provides an easy solution for recording thoughts on the go when computers or pencil and paper are not available. Whatever electronic or manual method I choose to use, there are many ways to streamline the process of reflective practice.

Connecting reflective practice with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders is a natural fit. All six of the standards require thoughtful planning, relationship building, and effective management skills. Standard Five addresses integrity, fairness, and ethical behavior. Integrity and ethical behavior come naturally for many. However, ethical behavior is subjective. Reflection about these issues will promote learning and more thoughtful decision making in the future. Incorporating reflective practice into the everyday routine is imperative to promoting a positive learning environment.

Principal as a Change Agent

An educational leader has many significant roles to perform throughout the course of a career. First and foremost, a principal is an educational leader. Leading by example is a critical task. The principal must ensure that the necessary tools are available for students and staff. Secondly, a principal is a manager of the day-to-day operations of a school. This does not mean that the role of manager is divorced from the role of educational leader. The two should be a blend complementing each other along the way. Additionally, not separate from the educational leader/manager role, is that of the change agent. While times change, a principal must adjust the mode of operation to meet the challenges of transformation.

How does a principal lead a school toward success during these ever-changing times? One tried and true method is to use honesty with staff members and students. Keeping the stakeholders informed is vital to consensus building. Being forthcoming and sincere is part of the relationship building process that is the foundation for anyone in a leadership role. A supported and trusted leader will be able to introduce, implement, and nurture initiatives with greater success than one who is less forthcoming and does not have positive relationships. I have had experience with a principal who was forthcoming and collaborative about upcoming changes in my building. Changes were made successfully, because teachers had ownership of the process. In contrast, I have had top-down decisions

made in my building without the opportunity for input from teachers with valuable experience. This created a climate of mistrust and division among the faculty. That experience has taught me to draw on the wealth of knowledge and experience to enhance consensus building. A supportive and open administrator is a successful leader of change.

With high-stakes testing in the headlines today, all educational leaders must strive to guide and assist teachers to have high standards for their teaching and curriculum. Having high standards for teachers alone is not enough. There must be a high level of expectations for students as well. Veteran principal, Al Silveira recognizes that, "Student learning will not improve if you have high standards but low expectations for students" (Bushman, Sahakian, 2003, p. 35). In this standards-based world, principals cannot afford to let complacency settle in for staff or students. Silveira goes on to say, "Teachers can make adjustments, but students must take control of their own learning" (2003, p. 35). This begins at the elementary level. Modeling respect and responsibility for students and teachers is the first step in creating an environment that encourages taking personal responsibility for successes as well as mistakes. When leaders, teachers, support staff, and students have high expectations, school culture can become one of positive change.

Silveira goes on to discuss the intangibles that play a vital role in successful school reform initiatives. For example, the principal's credibility in

the community and school make a difference in the success of change. Therefore it is not only a good idea to become involved with community efforts, it is necessary for the development of relationships and the creation of a sense of trust in the community. A principal who has the support of key community members will have a better chance of introducing and successfully implementing change. Therefore, relationship building must extend far beyond the walls of the school building to truly build credibility as a school leader.

Professional development is a critical element in the process of change. This goes back to the notion that stakeholders need to have as much information about initiatives as possible to waylay nervousness and sometimes rejection of the unknown. Negativity can run rampant when teachers feel uncertain about what is expected. With proper training and the proper tools, teachers will be more likely to welcome change as an opportunity to affect positive results in student learning. An educational leader must work to provide the training necessary to bring even the most resistant staff member on board with change. This is not always an easy task with budget and time constraints. However, utilizing the strengths of staff member already on board with initiatives can help to work towards positive change. Peer mentoring is effective when gaps occur in training due to lack of funds or lack of adequate time. Placing those positive people in the right place can go a long way in creating a positive environment ripe for productive change.

Focus is another key area involved in implementing change. It is important to set goals and timelines for projects to avoid losing sight of intended outcomes. Moreover, the business of education involves a number of meetings; therefore, to avoid mismanagement of time, educational leaders should follow agendas to ensure adequate use of time and energy by all. Focusing on the end result is as important as concentrating on the steps along way. Educational change usually involves a series of steps and is not simply a moment in time when people decide to do things differently.

It is easy to lose sight of current initiatives when new ones arise. While change sometimes means moving away from one mode of operation to another, that is not always the case. Many times educational changes mean the addition or improvement of a teaching method or curriculum and not just a replacement for something already in use. Revisiting previously established guidelines will help to avoid the impression of the swinging pendulum.

There are many phases in the change process including the instructive, the transitional, and the high capacity stage, according to L. Lambert. The instructive phase is a time of organization and collaboration (Lambert 2005, p. 63). Collaboration is critical in this beginning stage of the change process. During this time, the principal's role is to create opportunities for conversation and involvement.

Lambert recognizes the second phase, known as transition. This is when the principal gradually lets go of the control of the change process. During this time, the principal is a source of on-going support and is a nurturer of teachers as they become leaders. Encouraging leadership abilities in teachers will help to create a feeling of ownership; thus, enhancing the success of school reform.

The final stage in the change process, according to Lambert, is the high leadership capacity phase. "Principal and teachers begin to share the same concerns and work together toward their goals" (Whitaker, 2003, p. 65). There is no longer the line between administrator and teacher. All parties involved are simply educators working towards the ultimate goal of higher achievement.

The principal plays a major role in the process of change. The process of change involves the stewardship of a district vision of learning. Secondly, the responsibility of maintaining and nurturing a school culture conducive to student learning falls on the shoulders of the principal. The management of the organization is a daily part of the duties of a principal. A well-organized administrator has greater success in the implementation of change. Being a facilitator of change also means engaging in conversations with community members as addressed in Standard Four. Acting in an ethical manner is always a part of being in a leadership position. Finally, a principal must be cognizant of the effect change has on the whole contextual environment involved and act accordingly.

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A principal is more than a manager, an educational leader, or an agent of change. According to Todd Whitaker, "The principal is the filter... and our behaviors set the tone" (2003, p. 27). A positive attitude, a good reputation, and the nurturing of others as leaders will foster an atmosphere open to the inevitable need for school reform.

Leader of Learners

There are unlimited opportunities in education in this country. Our children have never before had more information available to them with only the click of a mouse. However, so many people are not realizing the full potential for success, despite a country filled with opportunity and advantage. The growing disparity between those with economic advantage and those without is cause for concern for all educators because of the current emphasis on test results. For example, "Schools create intelligence; they do not merely certify it. Thus, the "intelligence" measured by tests is affected by a person's environment and is not solely the result of inborn characteristics" (Hout & Lucas, 1996, p. 27).

Teachers and principals must also consider that perhaps people have begun to take the limitless possibilities for personal growth for granted. Educators need to be aware of this trend and find ways to ignite the passion and desire for educational opportunities that is so alive in many other countries. There

An administrator is an advocate for higher standards while exemplifying what it means to be a life-long learner. This desire to become a life-long learner not only means pursuing higher education, but to continually strive to be aware socially and politically of issues affecting the community as well as the school.

An even greater concern is keeping up with the generation of millennials and their ever-changing learning styles. "The number of vehicles through which young people find entertainment and information (and one another) makes them a moving target for anyone hoping to capture their attention" (Zeller, 2006, p. 3). With a greater understanding of the changing trends in technology and learning styles, an educator can truly work to create a positive learning environment for students and staff. A progressive and positive learning community can open up a world of possibilities for all that are involved. This means that I must keep up with technology myself, so that I can essentially "practice what I preach." If it is best practice to teach through the use of technology, then as an instructional leader I need to stay one step ahead.

So many people in our country are prosperous and have every technological advantage available. However, there is also a large population of people in our country overlooked and seemingly lost in the shuffle. Some would say that in our land of plenty there is no excuse for not becoming well educated. However, cultural and socioeconomic factors inhibit this academic growth for a variety of reasons. Various cultures devalue or view education as irrelevant. A

low tax base, declining enrollment, and deteriorating facilities have created a burden for many schools. What can I do to overcome these adversarial conditions? In short, never give up on the students or myself. Even in the midst of less-than-quality physical conditions, I can facilitate change in the lives of students and the community by advocating for the needs of all.

With the increasing need for documentation to show evidence of educational growth and accountability, this job can seem quite daunting and even impossible at times. Government initiatives are not in place to complicate the lives of educators, but to set standards of excellence. For example, when I first became a teacher, it seemed that it would be difficult to show evidence of meeting all of the Iowa Teaching Standards within two years. However, in retrospect, it seems like a minor task and one that simply showed evidence of the things a good teacher would do anyway. Having those standards in place forces educators to set goals and continually strive to attain them.

Would educators reach for excellence without such standards in place? Perhaps there would be some that would, but it is my belief that many would settle for just getting by instead of going above and beyond. Therefore, for educators and students to truly take full advantage of all of the opportunities our country has to offer, I believe that we need to continue to have high standards in place. In other words, we need to set the bar just a little bit higher to remain competitive with the rest of the world.

place. In other words, we need to set the bar just a little bit higher to remain competitive with the rest of the world.

Teaching children is the number one goal of any educator. However, an educational leader is not only responsible for the annual yearly progress of students, but for the growth and development of the staff. Without the proper professional development for teachers, the potential for growth for students will be limited. Therefore, to see the continued trend of improved test scores in students, there needs to be a deliberate effort to continually improve the skills of the teachers.

In a perfect world, all teachers would be highly qualified and would possess a never-ending passion for teaching. However, for many, a sense of complacency develops when the proper leadership does not exist. The mode of operation for them becomes doing only what they are comfortable with, whether it is what is best for students or not. As Todd Whitaker points out, "Teachers do the best they know how" (2003, p. 35). Therefore, it is up to me to ensure that teachers have the skills necessary to effectively teach their students and communicate with the parents. "If we want people to do better, we must teach them how" (2003, p. 36). Whitaker goes on to discuss the importance of getting into the classrooms. Making the education process a priority in the eyes of the students and the teachers will make a difference in the effectiveness of instruction. Principals can send the message of high expectations by making

principal. I believe that his time was well-invested and one that I will model my leadership style after.

Simply being present and visible is not enough. Walk-through observations and involvement is important. However it must go deeper than that. The principal must provide learning opportunities for teachers. The purpose of professional development is to address specific goals such as classroom management. Additionally, the principal needs to allot time for teachers to be out of the classroom to attend workshops and classes. Investing time and efforts will pay dividends in the long run.

Another method of improving teacher quality is to get teachers into each other's classrooms. This takes some logistical savvy to keep classrooms covered, but it offers the opportunity to share ideas, lesson plans, and classroom management styles. All professionals can find themselves in a rut and would benefit from fresh, new ideas. Even if the ideas are not new to the one who is currently using them, they are new to the observer. Utilizing the strengths of the teachers on staff is a way for a principal to promote improved learning in teachers; thus, improved learning in students.

However, the responsibility for learning is not only limited to the walls of the school building. Educators must extend the invitation to improved learning to the greater community involved with the school system. This includes parents,

local businesses, and community organizations. Rather than working as separate entities, it is wise to collaborate and work together for the good of students.

The first step is to develop a climate of trust and collaboration between parents, businesses, and community organizations and the school. Open houses, personal telephone calls, regular communication, and involvement in community events foster trust. Visibility is part of being involved but not the only factor. To establish a sense of credibility and trust, there must be a genuine contribution of time through community involvement. An educational leader who cares takes advantage of opportunities to meet parents outside of the school.

The next step is to realize that there is not a one-size fits all model of how to establish this connection with parents and the community. The expectations for a principal will vary depending on the culture and climate of a community. A principal must be willing and able to adapt to the needs and expectations of a community.

Extending an invitation for parental involvement will be necessary in many settings. In some cases, parents may want to be involved in the day-to-day functions of the school and their children's education, but they lack the direction from school leadership needed to contribute (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Many parents would benefit from training on how they can help their child with homework such as math, reading, social studies, science, and other academic activities. As common sense tells us, children with parents who show an interest

in their education will more likely find success. Additionally, children who have parents who place a high priority on education and know how to help them with homework will do better than those who have no motivation or support from home.

The principal cannot solely be responsible for reaching out to parents and the community. It is the job of the principal to equip teachers with the tools and opportunities they need to begin the home-school relationship in the classroom. Encouraging and providing opportunities to include families in the educational process is the job of the principal. Many excellent teachers will already be in a position to take on such endeavors, while others may look at parental involvement in the classroom as a disturbance. This is an area where utilizing teachers as leaders can be beneficial. This will help teachers to utilize the valuable resource found in parental involvement.

Committing to educate the educators as well as the greater community will develop a positive culture of learning. This is an area that is important for all educational leaders. It is the job of the principal to assess, develop and find ways to improve the climate and culture. Utilizing the strengths of others is a means to achieving the shared vision in a school district. Continually reflecting and evaluating programs, curriculum, and teacher efficacy will keep a principal in an informed position and better able to meet the needs of all students.

Leader of Service

What does it mean to be a leader of service? There are many schools of thought on leadership style. The philosophy that seems to align most closely with being a leader of service in education is that of servant leadership. The concept of servant leadership does not mean that the leader or manager of an organization is the one to carry out all duties. It simply means that the servant leader is the one who fosters an environment of developing leadership in others throughout the organization. This philosophy centers on a leader who is committed to serving others without the need to service oneself.

Servant leadership is a style embraced by many in education. Teachers and principals alike are not in the job for personal gain. Educators work for others as well as each other. "Servant leaders also often do things that seem less than leaderish" (Buchanan, 2007, p. 34). Trusted and respected principals are in the kitchen helping to serve the special holiday meals that cause a great deal of stress for the cooks. They are tossing the ice melt out on the sidewalk while the overworked custodian cleans up the unexpected mess in the bathroom during a worse than usual round of influenza. A respected principal is one who steps in to cover for a teacher who has to suddenly leave to take her sick child to the doctor. This may inconvenience the servant leader for the moment but it works for the greater good of the learning environment and the overall climate.

Listening to others is a critical skill for a servant leader. Without working to clarify the will of the staff, misconceptions will prevail and a breakdown in trust will develop. An example of this would include the participation of the principal in grade level meetings. While it is not necessarily the job of the principal to run those meetings, being present and clarifying the needs of the teachers and students would be beneficial. A principal spends a great deal of her time involved in meetings and may feel that adding more would take away from the efficiency of the day. However, investing time with the teachers on a regular basis is imperative. I have found this to be a welcomed strategy as a teacher and one that I will continue as a principal.

Exercising empathy is a valuable characteristic for everyone. A servant leader is one who appreciates and works to develop the unique attributes of each shareholder. This is also an area where an effective leader can foster and utilize the leadership abilities in others. Opportunities to delegate arise as an effective leader recognizes and appreciates the attributes each individual has to offer. For example, the principal can utilize teachers with computer skills as technology mentors in the building.

Assuming good intentions in staff members as well as in students is also part of exercising empathy. In a punitive environment, it is easy disregard intentions and look only at an action. A servant leader will look beyond the behavior and consider the action.

Conclusion

Educators are more than just teachers. Effective teachers are more than simply instructors, and instructional leaders are more than just administrators. Servant leadership is more than a method of managing a school or an office. It is something that encompasses the essence of a person. A servant leader is one whose foundational beliefs begin with the notion to serve first. This leadership persona is not something that one turns on while at work, it is generally part of the guiding principles a person has and affects all aspects of a person's life. A leader of service encompasses all facets of the leadership role of the principal, including the role of a reflective practitioner, a change agent, and a leader of learning for students as well as adults. Thankfully, it is my desire to serve others and to assist them on the road to success, be it elementary students or the teachers and support staff who influence them on a regular basis. It is my goal to foster leadership abilities in others to create a positive learning environment for the students and staff whom I will have the privilege to serve.

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